



Sword of Justice

By CAROLINE OVERINGTON
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All mothers think this, but Rosalie Sword was sure that there was something different about her little girl, Kirsty. She was born at Jessie MacPherson Hospital in Melbourne, a "thoughtful" baby, and then a quiet, sensitive child.

"In part, I think it was because of the way her father and I tried to raise her," Mrs Sword said. "He (father Brian Sword) was a great educator (the late Mr Sword was a long-serving principal of Eagle Hawk Primary School in Bendigo) and we encouraged our children to question things, and not to just accept everything they were told."

It was no surprise to Mrs Sword then, when her daughter, Kirsty, went to Indonesia as a university student, and came back a resistance fighter.

"She went to Bali to do the tourist thing," Mrs Sword said.

"At the same time, at Melbourne and then Monash universities, she was learning a lot about the politics of Indonesia, and what was

happening in East Timor. Once she knew, she could never turn her back on the people there."

The young Ms Sword moved to Jakarta in 1991. On the surface, she was an English teacher and aid worker who could speak both Portuguese and Indonesian, but she had also adopted the code-name "Ruby Blade" (Blade for Sword) and was working for the East Timorese resistance.

"The years she spent in Jakarta were very worrying," Mrs Sword said. "She confided in us that she was working underground. We were unable to tell anybody. There were times when I was very, very worried, but we believed what she was doing was right."

One of Kirsty Sword's tasks, about which she told almost nobody, was to get information to East Timorese prisoners being held in Indonesian prisons, including the jailed leader of the outlawed guerrilla movement, Xanana Gusmao.

Speaking last week to a roomful of supporters at the New South Wales Parliament House, just

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six weeks after the birth of her son, Sword described how she had first started to work for East Timor on behalf of Amnesty International.

"I want to thank them," she said. "Without them, in a very literal way, I may never have met my husband."

Xanana Gusmao, one of seven children, was a soccer player and schoolmaster, and a member of the educated elite of East Timor before the Indonesian invasion in 1975. A reluctant resistance fighter, he nevertheless became commander of Falintil, and operated from the mountains, isolated from the world, often with no external arms supplies, no modern weapons and, at one point, just 150 armed rebels to call upon.

He was captured by the Indonesian army in 1992, after which he directed the resistance from his Jakarta cell, aided by the woman he knew as "Ruby Blade".

Asian Wall Street Journal journalist Jeremy Wagstaff, who worked for Reuters in Jakarta during the 1990s, explains that, at that time, East Timor was "pretty much a lost cause. The official view was that Timor was not an issue, that Indonesia's presence there was benign and widely appreciated by the indigenous population. But somehow the issue was kept alive, largely by the activities of a few brave Timorese students, well-served by Kirsty. She had to tread a delicate balance given her role as an Australian aid worker. It was a dangerous game for her, since at best it would have brought opprobrium on her, her organisation and Australia if her role had been exposed, and at worst it could have led to her being subjected to treatment her Timorese friends were used to at the hands of the security forces".

Wagstaff remembers Sword as a "warm but quiet woman set slightly apart from most expats; she spoke excellent Indonesian and,

indeed, taught me for awhile. She lived a very modest life. She never made currency of her secret role and connections; indeed, if you didn't know it, you wouldn't believe it."

During her time as a resistance worker, Sword met Gusmao only once, in December 1992, and then not again for four years, but came to know each other via clandestine correspondence. When Gusmao was released, he returned to East Timor and, having divorced his wife of 28 years, Emilia Baptista (she and sons Nito and Zeni have lived in Melbourne since 1990), he married Sword. The couple now have a son, Alexandre Sword Gusmao, born in September.

"He is a treasure," Sword said last week. "He is also really well-behaved, despite the often uncomfortable situations I expose him to: hot and noisy UN Hercules planes, boring (for him) receptions with visiting dignitaries and just the routine unpleasantness of life in Dili, the humid heat and regular power cuts." Among the many gifts the child received was a pair of mini-fatigues from their great friend, the Australian head of the Interfet force, Major-General Peter Cosgrove.

According to friends, the defacto President and First Lady of the independent East Timor are modest, unpretentious people. They point to their house: Sword could have chosen for herself any of the best homes in Dili, including perhaps the former governor's residence, but instead, the family lives in a village in the hills. There is a moat that you have to cross to the house, and a drain down the middle of the road. The place is surrounded by Brazilian bodyguards, but local children are allowed to come and go, and tumble around the furniture. The power goes off all the time. There is plumbing, but it is basic.

"Both she and Xanana are both extremely modest. They have nothing, and that is the way

she lives," says Sword's Dili-based Canadian aid worker friend, Ms Helen Vanwell.

"I know that recently they were offered an airconditioner for their little house, but she was concerned about literacy rates for women in East Timor, and so put it in the reading room she has set up in Dili. The important thing though is that, as well as being very unpretentious and gentle, she's not afraid. Actually, she's an Australian heroine."

When Sword gave birth, it was in the rape-assessment room of Dili's hospital, because this was the room in which she would have the most privacy. She had an Irish midwife, and three East Timorese midwives that the Irish woman was training. There was no obstetrician, and she had no pain relief. "It wasn't so bad," said her mother, Rosalie, who attended the birth. "They're wonderful people, the international Red Cross. It was very safe, really. Compared to the average East Timorese woman, it was excellent. Kirsty at least has wonderful health, and good nutrition all her life."

As well as choosing to live modestly, Sword has decided, against the judgment of others, to take an active role in the affairs of her adopted homeland. It was the plight of 14-year-old Juliana Dos Santos that moved her to last week make a speech about rape in war. In the month that followed the independence ballot, Juliana was captured, raped, and then paraded along the West Timor border, in front of friends and family, "like a war trophy". She has since given birth, and signed a statement saying she loves her captor, and wants to stay in West Timor.

In her speech, her first as the new wife of Gusmao, Sword accused members of the TNI-backed militia of the rape of countless East Timorese women, among them 33 who became pregnant, and who are now receiving care at

East Timor's first crisis centre for rape victims. It was a speech that could have inflamed tension between Indonesia and East Timor, but Sword was determined to make it.

"When I first travelled to East Timor in the 1990s, I fell in love with the physical beauty of the place, but also the spirit of the people. I felt that, if I had an opportunity to help, then it would be an honor to do so. I was aware that there was a risk to my safety, but I thought, given the flagrant abuse of human rights, and the attitude of governments including our own, that helping these people was worth the risk.

"I haven't really defined my new role yet, but I don't feel daunted by it. In many ways, it is a continuation of what I was doing before, but with more influence. The plight of women raped in war is important to East Timorese women, and I want to speak in sync with them." Sword is also committed to the creation of a national archive, to document the resistance years, and to women's literacy.

That Sword has committed herself to high profile does not surprise her friend, the Sydney-based Ms Margherita Tracanelli, herself a resistance worker, and a former assistant to the East Timorese Nobel Peace Prize winner, Jose Ramos Horta.

"It's who she is," Ms Tracanelli said. "Once you've been bitten by the resistance bug, you can't turn and walk away. It's about people's lives."

There is, however, speculation, probably fuelled by Indonesia, that the East Timorese people are suspicious of the Australian-born First Lady, and of her motives. Sword's mother, who attended her daughter's wedding at a seminary in Date, outside Dili, said her daughter's marriage was not one of convenience.

"She has loved him (Xanana) for a long time," Mrs Sword said. "She told me that a long time ago. Probably in 1995, she told me that. I couldn't quite believe it was happening. He was in prison, and they'd only met once, but I realised that it really was love."

Wagstaff agrees that Sword's commitment is real. "She's a quite extraordinary woman who's made some serious sacrifices for the man she loves and the country she loves. I doubt there are many who would have remained so dedicated through such difficulties," he said. At the same time, "she's no lightweight. She's been through it all; I'm sure there are no illusions about what she's taken on".

Sword acknowledges that "there are whispers about me, but I think it is often an attempt to hurt Xanana politically. The majority of East Timorese accept me, I believe, and recognise the difference between the newcomers to East Timor, and long-term supporters of the struggle".

Now that she is the likely First Lady of East Timor, and yet Australian-born, Sword is anxious to show her commitment to her adopted homeland. Speaking while her new son slept in the arms of Major-General Cosgrove's wife, Lynne, she said her "roots are now firmly anchored in East Timor. It is a country I love, and have fought passionately for, with people that I also love and fought for".

She has adopted the cause of women raped in war and intends to use her "privileged position" to give women of developing nations a voice. "It is why it is important for those who can speak to do so," she said, "to give voice to the women's suffering, and give them back their dignity."

This year, Timorese leaders agreed that Xanana Gusmao should lead a unified, East Timorese government, made up of representatives of all

significant parties, for perhaps five years after the UN withdraws. Sword has therefore agreed, "as reluctantly as my husband has agreed to be leader", to be East Timor's First Lady but these are not roles to which either party clings.

Speaking to The Sunday Age while receiving the Sydney Peace Prize at Sydney University last week, Xanana Gusmao said neither he nor his wife agreed with the idea "that it is destiny" that he lead East Timor.

"My destiny was in regard to the struggle," Gusmao said. "Now what I have to do is explain to the people that they must put their effort into democracy, and learn to trust democracy, to explain to them that it does not depend on me, it depends on the system."

The East Timorese were "still emotional, sentimental" about the role he had played in gaining independence, but "it's not for me to exploit this, to take advantage of this. There are many people who could lead. What we need now is new leaders. They cannot wait only for me".

Sword believes that "in his heart, his dreams, his wildest fantasies, there was a part of Xanana that wanted to slow down a little, to not take on the whole, global rebuilding, but he has a responsibility to the East Timorese people, and I knew, if I was going to be part of his life, that the pressure on him to lead would be great, and that I would have to be part of that. Of course, I knew it would be dangerous. I am told that, when people want to get at a leader, they often target his family. I'm told I should have personal bodyguards, but I find the idea abhorrent. Instead, I intend to live my life as normally as possible here, and to support and work for him. It is not something I find daunting".

If he is to be elected, Gusmao will have an active First Lady. "There is still work to be done, and while I am in a position to do it, I will try to help," Sword said. "I guess that is part of the way I am."

Her mother agrees.
"It's not for her to just sit quietly," Mrs Sword said.

"That's why I'm extremely proud of her, and I have been since she was a little girl. She was always like that. She never accepted, she always questioned. Her father was wonderful at helping to bring up children who were responsible citizens."